

Navigating Dual Roles: Indonesian Migrant Workers as Students at Universitas Terbuka Taiwan

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Abstract

Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan face different challenges and opportunities to migrant workers from other countries in Taiwan, as they work while pursuing higher education through Universitas Terbuka Taiwan (UT Taiwan). This research explores how they simultaneously balance their dual roles as workers and students. This study utilizes a qualitative research approach by using in-depth and semi-structured interviews to understand the roles of Indonesian migrant workers as students and workers in Taiwan. This research used a purposive sampling strategy using 30 Interviewees; the interviews were conducted online. The criteria for selecting Interviewees are as follows: 1) Status as Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan, 2) Registered as an active student at UT Taiwan, and 3) Active as a worker and student at UT Taiwan. The results show that access to flexible online learning opportunities empowers workers to improve their skills, aspire to better livelihoods in the future, and prepare to return to Indonesia. The study concludes that Indonesian migrant workers simultaneously engage in learning and working activities to continue their unfulfilled dreams. Distance learning conducted by UT Taiwan is a means for them to obtain a bachelor's degree, which is one of the important assets for continuing their careers when they return to Indonesia. Distance learning and methods that support migrant workers can contribute to broader issues such as lifelong learning, labor mobility, and transnational education.

Keywords: Indonesian migrant workers, dual roles, distance learning, transnational education

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Introduction

The context of globalization, the movement of labor across borders has become increasingly prevalent. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the ambivalent position of migration as a pathway to human development (Suhardiman et al., 2021). The movement of labor in Southeast Asia is an issue of growing interest and increasing importance (Tipayalai, 2020). The concept of social justice has similarly been subject to contention, as dominant and influential stakeholders have either invalidated its significance or vigorously opposed its imperatives (Bruce, 2021). A lengthy discussion on how best to integrate migrant workers into host societies is longstanding in discussions of migration and globalization studies (Goh & Lee, 2022).

Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs) in Taiwan are a notable part of the transnational labor force (Wang, 2022). Temporal changes from border shifts involve migrant workers experiencing public health crises and labor market shortages (Lan, 2022). Many Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan still struggle with a lack of skills, limiting their performance and economic independence (Wisnujati et al., 2024). Bonding and linking social capital, forming strong friendships and relationships with employers to access resources and support for Indonesian migrant workers (Guritno & Aryo, 2024). IMWs remit a significant amount of their earnings to Indonesia, contributing to their country's national income and helping to reduce unemployment (Maksum et al., 2020).

Migrant workers often experience systemic barriers to access to education (Evsyukova et al., 2025; King, 2024). The migration of skilled workers can facilitate knowledge transfer and increase productivity, but it also raises concerns about brain drain from the home country (Prato, 2025). IMWs play an important role in Taiwan's economy and their efforts through increased education and entrepreneurship. IMWs help Taiwan's labor shortage, especially in the manufacturing and construction sectors, and they also help Taiwan's economic growth (Maksum et al., 2020).

E-learning, online education, and distance learning have become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Culduz, 2024). Distance learning has both advantages and disadvantages compared to face-to-face learning (Childs et al., 2024). Success in distance learning challenges open universities to meet the expectations of students and stakeholders (Zuhairi et al., 2020). Distance learning can increase the ability to interact and participate as the barrier of fear is removed (Al-Tkhayneh et al., 2022). Learning activities that are relevant to current developments are 21st-century learning (Nora et al., 2023). This paper examines the dual roles of Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMWs) as both employees and students at Universitas Terbuka Taiwan (UT Taiwan), exploring how they navigate these roles and the impact on their personal and professional development.

Migrant students often face discrimination and social isolation, which hurts their academic performance and mental well-being (Abdusamatov et al., 2024; Clothey & McCommons, 2022), and this can be the case for migrant workers who are also continuing their education.

Experiencing obstacles in working, which is their source of finance coupled with college, is a challenge for migrant workers. According to Streitwieser et al. (2019) is higher education institutions and policymakers should adopt a longer-term perspective, increase transparency, and use evidence-based approaches to develop and evaluate support programs for migrant workers.

Migrant workers, mainly from Indonesia, experience many challenges, including employer support, culture, time management, and mental health. However, these challenges are opportunities for their career education advancement, besides the system that supports reducing these challenges that allow them to succeed in achieving their dreams as undergraduates. This study aims to see how the dual role of Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMWs) in Taiwan plays a role as workers and students in carrying out activities together.

Methods

The qualitative approach in this study is using in-depth interviews to collect data from IMWs in Taiwan. The researcher selected 30 IMWs to be interviewed using the following criteria: 1) Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan, 2) status as a student at UT Taiwan, and 3) Willingness to be interviewed. Interviews use Zoom to accommodate the time and location of IMWs' residences. Triangulation is carried out to analyze research findings from various data sources, methods, and theories as a form of credibility and validity in this study (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024).

Table 1

Interviewees Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan

Interviewees	Age (years)	Gender	Length of work (years)	Sectors
Interviewee 1	24	Woman	4	Domestic workers
Interviewee 2	25	Woman	4	Domestic workers
Interviewee 3	26	Woman	3	Domestic workers
Interviewee 4	24	Woman	6	Domestic workers
Interviewee 5	25	Woman	5	Domestic workers
Interviewee 6	28	Woman	4	Caregiver
Interviewee 7	30	Woman	6	Domestic workers
Interviewee 8	30	Woman	6	Domestic workers
Interviewee 9	31	Woman	6	Caregiver
Interviewee 10	28	Woman	7	Caregiver
Interviewee 11	26	Woman	7	Caregiver
Interviewee 12	36	Woman	8	Domestic workers
Interviewee 13	21	Woman	4	Factory
Interviewee 14	26	Man	3	Factory
Interviewee 15	25	Woman	4	Caregiver
Interviewee 16	22	Woman	6	Domestic workers
Interviewee 17	23	Woman	4	Domestic workers
Interviewee 18	28	Woman	5	Caregiver
Interviewee 19	30	Woman	6	Caregiver
Interviewee 20	24	Man	3	Factory
Interviewee 21	23	Man	7	Factory
Interviewee 22	25	Man	6	Factory
Interviewee 23	26	Man	5	Factory
Interviewee 24	23	Man	5	Factory
Interviewee 25	24	Woman	5	Domestic workers
Interviewee 26	25	Woman	4	Domestic workers
Interviewee 27	26	Woman	3	Domestic workers
Interviewee 28	25	Woman	3	Domestic workers

Interviewees	Age (years)	Gender	Length of work (years)	Sectors
Interviewee 29	24	Woman	3	Factory
Interviewee 30	26	Woman	4	Factory

Result and Discussion

The current number of foreign migrant workers in Taiwan is significant, with many coming from Indonesia. The following data from the Ministry of Labor on the country of origin of workers in Taiwan indicates that Indonesian workers represent a substantial portion of the foreign labor force. This influx has contributed to Taiwan's economy and created unique challenges for these workers as they balance employment with academic pursuits (Soraya & Chen, 2022).

Table 2

Foreign Workers in Taiwan by Nationality and Gender

Nationality	Total	Male	Female
Indonesia	274,547	92,757	181,790
Vietnam	223,713	150,564	73,145
Philippines	159,774	69,159	90,615
Thailand	71,104	60,255	10,849

Data Source Statistics from the Ministry of Labor, March 2025.

Their dual roles as workers and students present unique challenges and opportunities for personal and professional development. IMWs who have a variety of education before leaving for work in Taiwan. The findings of this study suggest that the desire to learn by IMWs in Taiwan is very high, and UT Taiwan, which organizes distance education, plays an important role in supporting IMWs' aspirations.

Flexible Learning Opportunities

The availability of flexible online learning opportunities through UT Taiwan enables migrant workers to balance their work and study commitments. This flexibility is crucial in allowing them to pursue higher education without sacrificing their employment.

The combination of work and study for IMWs in Taiwan creates polar emotions, including stress and anxiety, as migrant workers struggle with ideal time management. These emotions also impact their academic performance. UT Taiwan, as an organizer of distance education, is the answer for IMWs for higher education so far, working while studying.

The study and work time is very flexible. However, the lack of support from my new employer has made. The break in focus has resulted in my work and learning not being maximized. The new employer has not yet adapted to employees taking on multiple roles. However, I am trying to overcome the problem by dividing my time during the day to focus on studying at night. From 9.00 at night, I can focus on studying. (Interviewee 9)

UT Taiwan, as the organizer of distance learning, provides flexibility for IMWs to learn anywhere because learning can be accessed through the page <https://elearning.ut.ac.id/>. UT Taiwan also sends printed modules to IMWs throughout Taiwan. IMWs in Taiwan who work

during the day can open the learning website at every day. The flexibility of time in learning is what IMWS finds helpful and by their working position.

UT Taiwan has a distance learning support system through its e-learning; besides that, UT Taiwan also has activities outside of learning, such as student organizations, to foster a sense of togetherness among students. The experience of IMWs also highlights the importance of resilience and adaptability in the face of obstacles in pursuing education while fulfilling their obligations as workers. Their experience was illustrated through extensive empowerment in education, ultimately leading to better opportunities after returning to Indonesia. This education can have a significant impact because IMWs have a perception to change their view of their role in improving socio-economic status. Their dual role responsibilities can contribute positively to their families and communities. This dual journey plays an important role in redefining their identity and liberating societal stereotypes that migrant workers also have the right to higher education. Higher education paves the way for a brighter future for IMWs in Taiwan with various experiences and learning while at UT Taiwan while working in Taiwan.

Skill Enhancement and Career

Higher education improves the knowledge and skills of migrant workers, which also contributes to their work so far. One of them said that “studying while working makes me easier and more skilled in communicating” (Interviewee 1). UT Taiwan students have hope for the future: “I want to return to Indonesia and work even better after graduating from this college” (Interviewee 15).

Indonesian migrant workers in higher education seek to empower them to improve their skills and knowledge, contributing to their professional development. After returning to Indonesia, the Interviewees expressed aspirations for better career opportunities and better livelihoods. They seek to improve their skills and abilities to foster confidence and seek positions according to their expected qualifications by attending university. As they acquire new knowledge and competencies, these migrant workers are better equipped to contribute to their communities and drive economic growth in their hometowns, as stated “Sometimes, people think education is unimportant, but education is essential for me” (Interviewee 13).

The skills gained through higher education at UT Taiwan led to increased remittances, as educated migrants often landed higher-paying jobs, thus benefiting their families and communities back home. The cycle of education and economic support, as well as expectations to improve the quality of life, is in line with the aspirations of migrant workers. The potential of educated migrant workers as agents of change in the community to inspire others as education plays an important role in encouraging sustainable development in Taiwan.

The knowledge and experience possessed by IMWs in their dual role can motivate them to pursue the same path as other migrant workers. This can contribute to the broader community's appreciation of lifelong education. Education initiatives are a form of policy that must be continued. UT Taiwan addresses the gap with easy and affordable distance learning in upskilling migrant workers in the job market, which will broadly impact the socio-economic contribution of Taiwan and Indonesia in the future.

Fulfillment of Personal Aspirations

Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs) in Taiwan pursue higher education as a form of fulfilling personal dreams that have not been achieved before leaving for Taiwan. Achieving this education is a means to improve future career prospects and a form of satisfaction and achievement for IMWs personally.

I can improve, get used to time management, upgrade communication, and hopefully, I will be able later. Also, when dealing with anything, we become more critical thinkers. (Interviewee 3)

IMWs hope for future educational success. IMWs who study become role models in the community, inspiring others to pursue higher education. These are small but big effects on human development. This educated IMWs trip should be an opportunity for UT Taiwan to socialize more widely. The dual role of workers and students can be done together and have a positive impact on the individual IMWs and the community in general.

This collective improvement can lead to increased community resilience and benefit Indonesia, as educated individuals are better positioned to address local challenges in Taiwan and advocate for community needs in Taiwan. Through their educational journey, IMWs cultivate a sense of identity beyond their worker role, reflecting a commitment to lifelong learning and community improvement. This transformation underscores the profound impact of education on the personal and social levels.

Distance Learning Challenges for Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan

Balancing the dual roles of workers and students demands effective time management. Migrant workers often work long hours, leaving limited time for academic activities. One of the interviewees studied at night.

... UT provides opportunities for me to continue their studies is very advantageous because the time is more flexible so that I can do studying at night; it is just that the lack of teaching and learning interaction makes me feel a little difficult to understand the teaching materials in the module ... (Interviewee 10)

There are also UT Taiwan students who have difficulty meeting assignment completion deadlines. As a result, many migrant workers report feelings of overwhelm, which can hinder their academic success and overall well-being. In addition, this online-based learning also causes burnout as they struggle to find a sustainable balance between their responsibilities as students and workers. The emotional burden of juggling work and study can also manifest in decreased motivation and engagement with the lecture material. UT Taiwan must recognize these challenges and provide tailored support services, such as counseling and academic guidance, to help migrant workers navigate their unique circumstances.

IMWs find themselves in a cycle in which the need to provide for their families overshadows their educational aspirations, creating significant barriers to their academic pursuits. According to students, studying at UT Taiwan is affordable. "The more affordable the cost of studying here is, the more it will help me achieve my dream of becoming an undergraduate" (interviewee 17). By reducing the financial burden, these initiatives can empower migrant

workers to prioritize their education, ultimately enabling them to achieve their academic and career goals.

Access to technology and reliable internet is critical to the success of distance learning undertaken by IMWs. IMWs face challenges related to accessing computers that they did not have before. However, this does not hinder their ability to participate in learning because they finally meet their learning needs by buying adequate devices. At first, they felt isolated and frustrated as they struggled to adapt to remote learning, gradually getting used to it. Fortunately, such concerns did not occur as IMWs were already familiar with information technology.

Distance learning can lead to isolation, as students may not have the in-person support and interaction in the offline classroom. “Being a migrant worker and a student is not easy, but now migrant workers can easily want to be students because distance learning makes it possible” (Interviewee 27). UT Taiwan, through distance learning, has provided programs to connect migrant workers with all the access they need to fulfill academic travel, including seminars and events with fellow UT Taiwan students or alumni. UT Taiwan strives to create a positive environment for academic improvement and skill growth for IMWs. This support provides many benefits to IMWs in Taiwan, such as enhancing the academic culture expected for human development.

Discussion

The dual role of Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs) as students and employees requires policies within the framework of education as a form of support for their unique circumstances, increased access to resources, and building a collaborative environment. Educational institutions, including UT Taiwan, can play a role in turning the challenges so far into opportunities for growth and empowerment for IMWs. This balance of dual roles among IMWs gives them their position as people who have an impact on the migrant worker community in Taiwan. Personal transformation that benefits both individuals and creates motivation for other IMWs. This education is very important for the community to continue to develop, especially in the long term, because education is a way to change and grow the personality of IMWs. Investment in education for IMWs also contributes to creating a superior, more educated, and empowered society for Indonesia. Societies with higher education are easy to encourage in growth both economically and socially because educated individuals have an easier tendency to engage and advocate for environmental improvement.

The balance of dual roles as workers and students certainly has unique challenges and opportunities experienced by Indonesian migrant workers. Universitas Terbuka (UT) Taiwan, in this case, has an important role through flexible distance learning able to meet the educational needs of IMWs. Adaptability is also important in pursuing educational goals without sacrificing their work obligations. The interview results stated that IMWs had a positive impact after studying at UT Taiwan, including communication, problem-solving, and managerial skills. This is by the view Bykova et al. (2024) that education will be a factor in improving the workforce's skills, knowledge, and abilities in improving productivity at work.

The decision to pursue education after college graduation has many facets, involving a combination of personal motivation, social influence, financial considerations, and institutional factors. The results of this study illustrate that IMWs who aim to continue their education after graduating from UT Taiwan will also be IMWs who will return to Indonesia

and look for new jobs. This research is in line with research Boneva et al. (2022) that the goal of students to pursue higher education as a form of achieving future career prospects in order to be able to compete in the job market.

Distance learning offers a form of time flexibility and affordability in learning. Bismala and Manurung (2021) state that distance learning increases student satisfaction and improves learning outcomes. The advantages of distance learning make it an attractive choice for IMWs in Taiwan. IMWs who study remotely through UT Taiwan benefit significantly due to the flexibility of time and more affordable costs. However, distance learning still has challenges, such as self-management, potential technical issues, and a lack of face-to-face interaction (Turan et al., 2022). IMWs conveyed the need for UT Taiwan to continue to provide technical support, more interactive materials, and more flexible schedules.

Conclusion

Distance learning conducted by Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs) through Universitas Terbuka (UT) Taiwan provides a solution for time flexibility and affordability of education costs. Remote communication is beneficial in shaping the quality of communication, building a problem-solving mindset, and improving management skills for IMWs in Taiwan. Through distance learning, UT Taiwan is an important means to obtain a degree in higher education; this is an important asset for IMWs after graduation to continue their education and find a new job after returning to Indonesia. This distance learning supports broader issues and community socio-economic development through lifelong learning, labor mobility, and transnational education.

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